

Coping Scale for Difficult Socio-academic Situations: Short Version

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Abstract

The present study aims to test a short version and carry out a confirmatory analysis of the Coping Scale for Difficult Socio-academic Situations (*Escala de Enfrentamento para Situações Socioacadêmicas Difíceis* [EESSAD]). The sample consisted of 601 university students from different periods and programs, aged between 18 and 57 years ($M = 26.2$ years, $SD = 7.2$), most of them female (66.1%). All participants responded to the EESSAD on the spot. For confirmatory factor analysis, we used the maximum likelihood (ML) estimation method. Confirmatory factor analysis indicated a three-dimensional structure (ten items): focus on powerful others, focus on the problem, and focus on emotion. The discussion addresses the relevance of a reduced scale and discusses the structure in view of its contribution to facing the different obstacles of academic life. Future studies may relate coping to other phenomena in the university context and to sociodemographic data.

Keywords: coping, confirmatory analysis, psychological assessment, social academic situations, university student

ESCALA DE ENFRENTAMENTO PARA SITUAÇÕES SOCIOACADÊMICAS DIFÍCEIS: VERSÃO REDUZIDA

Resumo

O presente estudo teve como objetivo testar uma versão reduzida e realizar uma análise confirmatória da Escala de Enfrentamento para Situações Socioacadêmicas Difíceis (EESSAD). A amostra foi composta por 601 estudantes universitários de diferentes períodos e cursos, com idades entre 18 e 57 anos ($M = 26,2$ anos, $DP = 7,2$), a maioria mulheres (66,1%). Os participantes responderam à EESSAD no local. Para a análise fatorial confirmatória, usamos o método de estimativa maximum likelihood (ML) e os resultados indicaram uma estrutura tridimensional (dez itens): foco em outros poderosos, foco no problema e foco na emoção. A discussão aborda a relevância de uma escala reduzida e debate a estrutura, tendo em vista sua contribuição para o enfrentamento dos distintos obstáculos da vida acadêmica. Estudos futuros poderão relacionar o enfrentamento a outros fenômenos no contexto universitário e a dados sociodemográficos.

Palavras-chave: coping, análise confirmatória, avaliação psicológica, situações socioacadêmicas, estudante universitário

ESCALA DE AFRONTAMIENTO DE SITUACIONES SOCIOACADÉMICAS DIFÍCILES: VERSIÓN CORTA

Resumen

El presente estudio tiene como objetivo probar la versión reducida y realizar un análisis confirmatorio de la Escala de Afrontamiento para Situaciones Socioacadémicas Difíciles (*Escala de Enfrentamento para Situações Socioacadêmicas Difíceis* [EESSAD]). La muestra estuvo formada por 601 estudiantes universitarios de diferentes períodos y cursos, con edades comprendidas entre 18 y 57 años ($M = 26,2$ años, $DE = 7,2$), la mayoría mujeres (66,1%). Todos los participantes respondieron en el acto a la EESSAD. Para el análisis factorial confirmatorio utilizamos el método de estimación *maximum likelihood* (ML). El análisis factorial confirmatorio indicó una estructura tridimensional (diez ítems): enfoque en otros poderosos; enfoque en el problema y enfoque en la emoción. La discusión aborda la pertinencia de una escala reducida y también debate la estructura, en vista de su contribución para enfrentar los diferentes obstáculos de la vida académica. Estudios futuros pueden relacionar el afrontamiento con otros fenómenos del contexto universitario y con datos sociodemográficos.

Palabras clave: afrontamiento, análisis confirmatorio, evaluación psicológica, situaciones socioacadémicas, estudiante universitario

Difficult social academic situations can be experienced at different educational levels, and it is possible to establish some indicators of the criticality of these situations (Soares et al., 2021). Specifically, in higher education, the university entrance brings the beginning of new perspectives and allows students to trace paths with many expectations regarding their professional and personal future. It is a significant phase of transition and adaptation in relation to lifestyle and can potentiate stress, imbalance, and demand adjustment, causing an impact on the personal and academic levels (Moretti & Hübner, 2017). Students face challenges, such as involvement with the program, the ability to establish new relationships, and experience the presence of anxiety in the face of the demands of university life (Castro & Almeida, 2016).

For many students, dealing with the difficulties of higher education is not an easy task, as it involves intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual aspects. Thus, social situations considered difficult can be defined as a set of circumstances that require skills from the student to manage and seek possible solutions (Soares et al., 2019), such as public speaking, exposure to acquaintances and strangers, dealing with criticism, expressing feelings, receiving negative feedback, mobilizing colleagues, and expressing an opinion (Soares et al., 2016). The situations exemplified can interfere with coexistence and cooperation between people, affecting interpersonal relationships between group members and making communication and dialogue in various institutional sectors difficult (Soares et al., 2016).

Students have not always developed the skills needed to handle such situations. They require coping strategies to deal with recurring or university-specific daily events (Luca et al., 2018). Thus, coping comprises the internal (behavioral, cognitive, and emotional) resources used to confront stressful events (Carlotto et al., 2015). Therefore, coping is understood as a dynamic process and involves strategies that may change according to the reevaluations performed at the events, which may present better or worse results than the initial situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Coping strategies can be divided according to their focus into four groups, namely: emotion-centered, problem-centered, social support-centered, and religious-centered strategies (Oliveira et al., 2014; Pereira & Branco, 2016; Trindade & Vieira, 2013). The first set of strategies concerns a management capacity that helps reduce emotional discomfort in the face of stressors understood as unchanging. In problem-centered strategies, the individual identifies the points that need changes in the environment and performs interventions to mitigate modifiable stressors. Social support-centered coping strategies, in turn, refer to actions in which people expect their problems to be solved with help from others around them. Finally, strategies centered on religious/spiritual thinking refer to thoughts and behaviors related to an outward solution from divine sources, that is, the belief that something miraculous will happen and help them solve adversity.

Identifying and using the most appropriate coping strategies to address university challenges can help reduce stress levels, as students often face personal and interpersonal challenges, and many are unable to cope with the difficulties they encounter and drop out of

higher education (Ganesan et al., 2018). From this perspective, several studies have been conducted to build and validate instruments to evaluate coping strategies.

In the study by Boujut et al. (2012), the authors developed a coping questionnaire called Students' Coping Scale. Initially, they interviewed a sample of 40 participants and identified 33 difficult coping situations, then administered the scale to a sample of 1,100 first-year French university students, and, after six months, 556 of the total sample responded to a follow-up. The results of the analysis of the questionnaire obtained in the follow up identified three factors for the coping scale: focus on social support, focus on avoidance/emotion, and festive/addictive focus. The authors add that it would be relevant for students to develop personal skills to learn how to adopt functional coping strategies rather than harmful strategies.

Turashvili and Japaridze (2013) conducted an investigation of 252 students from different university programs in Georgia using the Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations Stress Life Inventory and the Kutcher Adolescent Depression Scale (KADS-6). The results show that different coping strategies are used in critical life events and that problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and religious coping are predictors of psychological well-being.

Kirikkanat and Soyer (2018) conducted a study with the Academic Coping Strategies Scale aimed at presenting the psychometric characteristics of the Turkish version of the scale. Participants included a total of 555 students from three universities in Istanbul. As a result of the exploratory and confirmatory analysis, a three-factor instrument was obtained, corroborating the original model in English. The validity of the criterion was examined using the following academic variables: self-efficacy, learning strategies, tendency of performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals. The results indicated that the academic coping strategies had significant correlations with the variables proposed in the model. The test retest resulted in consistent scores. These findings point to a measure with evidence of validity, providing opportunities to examine coping patterns of university students in a demanding educational context.

Despite the relevance of measuring the coping strategies used by university students, in the Brazilian scenario only one study was found on coping with difficult interpersonal situations in the academic context. With the aim of investigating specific aspects of coping situations at the university and presenting evidence of the validity of an instrument to measure the construct, Soares et al. (2018) conducted a survey with 1,366 students from public and private universities that resulted in the Coping Scale for Difficult Socio-academic Situations (*Escala de Enfrentamento para Situações Socioacadêmicas Difíceis* [EESSAD]). The instrument includes 26 items, divided into four categories (emotion-centered, problem-centered, social-support-centered, and religious-centered strategies), and presents satisfactory internal consistency to be used in studies on coping strategies for difficult social situations in the university context.

From this perspective, in the present study, we performed a confirmatory analysis of the EESSAD, considering the relevance of coping strategies for adaptation to higher education (Soares et al., 2018). We also tested a reduced version of the scale, in line with the tendency, in

the field of psychology, to use scales with fewer items (Schweizer, 2011), usually performed better than extensive scales (Kemper et al., 2018). As university students are target of many studies – some of them with extensive instruments, aimed at evaluating a series of variables included in the models –, shorter scales are necessary because the larger the instrument, the greater the risk of fatigue for participants, which may compromise data quality (Ferreira et al., 2016).

Given the above, we aimed to perform a confirmatory analysis of the EESSAD and test a reduced version for the instrument. The importance of research aimed at measuring coping in difficult socio-academic situations lies in the relevance of coping strategies for adaptation to higher education (Soares et al., 2018).

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of a total of 601 university students, most of them from public universities (88%), from the state of Rio de Janeiro, aged between 18 and 57 years ($M = 26.2$ years, $SD = 7.2$ – eight participants did not report this information), predominantly women (66.1%). Participants were enrolled in 24 different programs, with a predominance of Psychology (27.7%) and Business (16.6%) students, with most of them attending the first (45.8%) and third (18.8%) year of the programs, although there were students from different periods (35,4%). The predominant marital status was single (75.2%), although almost a quarter (24%) of the sample was married.

Instruments

All participants responded to the EESSAD (Soares et al., 2018). This measure consisted of 26 items, which describe situations that require university students to use assertive skills to deal with criticism, make claims, publicly manifest themselves in academic activities, express ideas and opinions, and refuse inconvenient requests. Example of item: “When I want to decline a request from a classmate who wants to join my group without doing the work, I explain my principles”. Items are answered on a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = never to 5 = always).

Ethical procedures

Participants were volunteers and signed the Informed Consent Form (ICF) as a way to record their agreement to collaborate with the study. All precepts of research with human beings were followed, and the research project was previously approved by the Research Ethics Committee under No. 31200914.4.0000.5289.

Data collection procedures

The data were collected in person in the classroom and with the consent of the coordinators and professors of the respective programs. All participants answered a sociodemographic questionnaire to characterize the sample.

Data analysis procedures

By means of a descriptive exploratory analysis of the data, we found that the items met the assumptions of multivariate normality (Shapiro-Wilk's method; p value $> .05$). Considering this result and weighing the sample size, for the estimation of parameters in the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), we chose to use the maximum likelihood (ML) estimation method with the support of Jamovi 1.6.3 software. Considering that the exploratory factor analysis (Soares et al., 2018) indicated a four-dimensional structure, we tested this model in the present research. Items whose factor load was above $.40$ were maintained. The adequacy of the models to the data was evaluated by the following indicators and respective reference values (Kline, 2011): $\chi^2/\text{degrees of freedom (df)} < 5$; Bentler Comparative Fit Index (CFI) $> .90$; Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) $> .90$; root mean square error approximation (RMSEA) of $< .08$; standardized root mean residual (SRMR) $< .05$. Pearson's coefficient was used to compare the reduced version with the original version of the scale.

Results

Initially, we tested a reduced version of the EESSAD. The criteria for choosing the items that would remain in this version of the scale were those that presented, simultaneously, higher factor loads and better model fit. Considering the confirmatory nature of the present study, only items whose factor load was above $.40$ were maintained.

The construction of a reduced version followed the previously identified three-dimensional structure, as well as a minimum of three items per dimension for greater measurement stability in different sample applications. Correlation analysis between the dimensions of the original version and the reduced one indicated very high correlations, which confirms the high similarity between the two versions. Pearson's coefficients for the correlations between the two versions of the scale in their respective dimensions were: focus on powerful others ($r = .99, p < .001$); focus on the problem ($r = .95, p < .001$); and focus on emotion ($r = .97, p < .001$). The correlation between the set of the original version and the reduced one was also of high magnitude ($r = .96, p < .001$).

The analysis of internal consistency of the EESSAD, as measured by Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega, presented two dimensions with good indicators – focus on powerful others ($\alpha = .780, \omega = .788$) and focus on the problem ($\alpha = .855, \omega = .857$) –, besides a dimension with indicator on the marginal limit proposed by the resolutions No. 25/2001 and No. 002/2003 of the Federal Council of Psychology – namely, focus on emotion ($\alpha = .675, \omega = .683$). About the latter, we tried the original version with six items, but it did not raise internal consistency, so we kept the reduced version.

Moreover, we tested the first model, consisting of ten items of the short version of the scale, divided into three dimensions, with good adjustment indicators. The following indicators and respective values were found: $\chi^2 = 116$; $df = 32$; $\chi^2/df = 3.63$; CFI = .955; TLI = .937; RMSEA = .066; SRMR = .434 (Table 1). The result of the CFA pointed to a satisfactory fit of the data to the hypothesized model.

Table 1*Confirmatory Factor Analysis of EESSAD*

	$\chi^2(df)$	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA (CI-.90)	SRMR
Model	116(32)	3.63	.955	.937	.066 (.057-.069)	.434

Note. Degrees of freedom (df); Comparative Fix Index (CFI); Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI); root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA); standardized root mean square residual (SRMR).

The correlations between the dimensions of the EESSAD dimensions were low or not significant, considering that the measure presents different strategies for coping with difficult situations. In other words, they are alternative strategies to each other, that is, either the person focuses on emotion or problem or beliefs that powerful people can help them. Table 2 presents the results obtained from the CFA of EESSAD, which has the number of remaining items per factor: focus on emotion and focus on other powerful others had four items each, and focus on the problem, three, totaling ten items.

Table 2*Factors, Items, and Loadings of EESSAD*

Factor	Item	Loading
Focus on powerful others	I want to express my opinion on the professor's method, I ask the "god" for more understanding.	.680
	I have to expose myself during the presentation of a seminar, I ask the "god" not to go blank during the speech.	.754
	I have to expose myself during the presentation of a seminar, I ask the "god" to be able to do it.	.569
	I receive academic criticism from colleagues, I ask the "god" for wisdom, so that, at the end of this situation, I can deal with criticism wisely.	.763
Focus on the problem	I receive academic criticism from classmates, I ask the professor the best way to study the content.	.871
	I want to refuse a request from a colleague who wants to join my group without doing the assignment, I explain my principles.	.740
	I want to express my opinion on the professor's method, I try to be clear.	.833
Focus on emotion	I am new in the class, I try to suppress my discomfort.	.526
	I want to refuse a request from a colleague who wants to join my group without doing the assignment, I control my anxiety.	.686
	I want to refuse a request from a colleague who wants to join my group without doing the assignment, I try to relieve my discomfort.	.720

Discussion

This study aimed at performing a confirmatory analysis of EESSAD and testing a reduced version of this scale. Confirmatory analysis obtained from the reduced version of the EESSAD (ten items) presented a different structure from that obtained by Soares et al. (2018), the original version. Since focus on social support was not confirmed, the reason why this dimension has not been maintained refers to the low factor loads of its items. Considering that CFA requires a more stable structure, the indicators required in this type of analysis need to be more robust than those applied in exploratory factor analyses.

The results support the proposition that reduced versions of the scale are more appropriate because students are often required to participate in research, which may cause fatigue, interfering with the responses (Ferreira et al., 2016; Schweizer, 2011). In addition, a scale with a smaller number of items allows the testing of models with a greater number of constructs, which can contribute to broadening the understanding of the phenomenon of academic adaptability.

Several aspects contribute to the success or difficulties in university experiences, with psychosocial and academic development being institutional and personal challenges (Castro & Almeida, 2016). Studies that allow the improvement of research and instruments in this field of knowledge may reveal efficient interventions that provide a quality teaching and learning process.

The coping dimensions observed in the literature (Carlotto et al., 2015) enable the development of the ability to deal with adversity, pointing that context changes are essential for the quality of adaptation processes. Facing the obstacles of academic life using adequate internal and external resources may indicate permanence in higher education institutions with significant progress in academic, social, and personal life (Luca et al., 2018; Ganesan et al., 2018; Moretti & Hübner, 2017; Soares et al., 2016). Thus, individuals seek internal or external conditions to deal with events that present a certain type of threat or discomfort, try to evaluate them, and choose a way of acting that they consider the most appropriate. In other words, they act and choose the strategy to deal with difficult situations.

The dimension focus on powerful others reflects a cognitive and behavioral positioning that relies on faith, spirituality, and religiosity in the face of difficulties. Some authors call this strategy religiousness and spirituality (Trindade & Vieira, 2013), which is associated with active coping strategies since there is an organization (cognitive process) to perform a religious or spiritual action. However, Trindade and Vieira (2013) pay attention to a careful analysis of the constructs of religiosity (bond with religion) and spirituality (belief in a higher being), highlighting the relevance of the student's conception in handling the stressful elements of daily university life, which would give a broader scope to the constructs. Students who adopt religious or spiritual coping strategy seem to be more passive and less skillful in handling difficult situations, considering that the occurrence of change depends on the interference of the individual's actions.

The dimension focus on problem refers to the student's effort to act in the situation that generated stress in order to change it (Oliveira et al., 2014). The function of this strategy is to change the problem in the relationship between the person and the environment that is causing the tension and often includes cognitive restructuring, such as redefining the stressor element.

The problem-focused strategy indicates a correlation with academic experiences and is supposed to be a predictor of university adaptation (Carlotto et al., 2015) and a contributor to better management of stressors. In this case, the focus on the problem would contribute to minimizing the difficulties encountered by students in dealing with the relationships and requirements of higher education. Students using this strategy seem more active because they are looking for possible solutions with their own resources or available in the context of handling difficult situations, even if they do not exhibit behaviors that lead to appropriate resolutions.

The focus on emotion dimension refers to behaviors that are preferentially focused on emotion, such as dropout and avoidance, and has been related to inadequate levels of adjustment to higher education (Carlotto et al., 2015). Furthermore, this strategy is defined as an effort to regulate the emotional state that is associated with stress or is the result of stressful events, and its function is to reduce the unpleasant physical sensation of a state of stress. The student who avoids or moves away from stressful situations does not try to face the difficulties but postpones the struggle or even expects the situation to have a satisfactory result without effective interference. Thus, knowledge of coping strategies can be revealed and worked on the student support services implemented by educational institutions, contributing to the well-being, quality of life, and, especially, the process of adaptation of students to higher education.

It is noteworthy that instruments that measure situations considered difficult to deal with highlight possibilities for new contributions in the field of coping and coping strategies for academic routine situations (Carlotto et al., 2015; Soares et al., 2018). Such instruments can contribute to possible interventions that help in the process of adaptation to higher education (Castro & Almeida, 2016; Soares et al., 2017). Thus, as we present a reduced version of the EESSAD, the application of the measure can be used in different contexts, including with other variables, helping to diagnose and also outline coping strategies for difficult socio-academic situations.

The fact that a three-dimensional structure has been confirmed, with a focus on powerful others, focus on the problem, and focus on the emotion, allows for more accurate identification of whom students assign responsibility for reversing difficult socio-academic situations. In this sense, the application of this scale has the potential to contribute to the confrontation of this type of situation, since the way in which university students perceive this phenomenon would be mapped. Professionals interested in and directly active in the field of higher education can benefit from the use of this scale, either by broadening their understanding of the coping strategies currently adopted by students or developing coping programs that help university students to adopt more appropriate strategies when faced with adverse social academic situations.

Moreover, the confirmatory analysis corroborated what has been presented in the literature on commonly encountered factors: focus on powerful others, focus on the problem, and focus on emotion. Not all dimensions are adaptive and favor the student's well-being (Boujut et al., 2012; Turashvili & Japaridze, 2013). The fact that social support has not been maintained as a dimension of the coping strategy scale may indicate the need to review the items on the original scale.

At the university, students deal with people with different characteristics and seek to solve situations, often looking for the collaboration of peers, professors, and family members, managing the difficulties with the help of a support network. Social support seems to set up a more robust alliance to deal with and address conflicts (Ganesan et al., 2018). The students in the sample are actively trying to resolve situations, looking for possible solutions, and waiting for resolutions to happen without them having to act.

The three dimensions maintained from the previous scale, focus on powerful others, focus on the problem, and focus on emotion, are coping strategies that depend exclusively on an individual's active process: control of their emotions, the ability to be objective and concentrate on the problem itself, or beliefs and faith (whether religious or ideological). The social support strategy, which was eliminated (Soares et al., 2018), is the only dimension that refers to asking for help from other people, that is, it goes outside the scope of the individual and their personal skills to solve problems. In this sense, an instrument with adequate psychometric properties to measure difficult social and academic situations contributes to the advancement of research on the subject and brings to the scene discussions about effective student support interventions and the learning process (Soares et al., 2017). Moreover, instruments that are considered appropriate for use in studies must provide accurate, valid, and reliable results (Souza et al., 2017).

The structure obtained for the scale allows its use in studies that address the relational issues of university students. It is important to understand the strategy styles most commonly used by them (Carlotto et al., 2015; Soares et al., 2018) with the purpose of providing possible supportive institutional interventions. Moreover, studies involving scale analysis enrich the discussion on the topic and do not end in themselves, which allows for new studies to be conducted, in order to add new evidence of validity to the instrument.

The results showed that the proposed structure is adequate, with the possibility of using a reduced version of the instrument that fits the perspectives of research with university students, who are usually required to participate in psychological research. The results showed that the reduced scale can be used as an alternative to the original version, as it, practically, allows for an equivalent evaluation of the three dimensions. Thus, there is an advantage in using the reduced version, as it saves time in collecting data in studies on coping with difficult social situations at the university.

The results obtained in the present study provide further evidence of the validity of the EESSAD, which can be used in prospective studies. It is evident that the scale is a useful and easily applicable tool, contributing to investigations on coping in higher education.

Finally, the limitations of the study are the small number of participants and the fact that only the CFA was performed. In this way, it is emphasized that further studies should be developed to confirm the structure of the instrument in other samples, with different characteristics, from different institutions and university environments. In this sense, we suggest studies that compare the model obtained with other alternative models and the convergence with other instruments, with the presence of fewer factors. It would also be enriching to conduct new studies with the scale and possible correlated variables in search of the expansion of the nomological network of the construct. New studies with other social support items can also contribute to confirming whether this dimension should be maintained on a scale of coping strategies. Furthermore, future studies to search for evidence of validity with external predictive measures of social skills (SH) are suggested, considering that students with an elaborate repertoire of SH use coping strategies that favor interpersonal relationships at the university.

These analyses may improve the scale even further. In addition, prospective studies with greater diversity of programs and students from other Brazilian states, including different cultural contexts, can be conducted to contribute to the improvement of the measure, considering the fact that it is an ongoing process.

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